



EUROPEAN  
INSTITUTE  
OF PEACE



**FAKE NEWS MISINFORMATION AND  
HATE SPEECH IN ETHIOPIA:  
A VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENT**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Fake news, misinformation, and hate speech have thrived in the Ethiopian media ecosystem, and particularly online. This is strongly correlated with significant, tragic, real-world consequences, exacerbated pre-existing tensions, and contributed to violence and conflict. To date, the Government of Ethiopia's response to combating the spread of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech has been, by necessity, heavy-handed, with the go-to response to escalation being to turn off the internet for the entire country.

This vulnerability assessment aims to outline an approach and framework to improve the understanding of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech in Ethiopia, to develop a more nuanced and tailored approach to addressing a real national challenge. While this study is preliminary and indicative, drawing on a relatively small sample size, it is hoped that it can be illustrative and used to improve the national conversation regarding the federal response to fake news, misinformation, and hate speech. Still, it does not claim to be and should not be considered the final word on the matter.

The assessment found that Ethiopia's media ecosystem's weaknesses have made it vulnerable to fake news, misinformation, and hate speech. Some of the driving factors are undoubtedly historical, including the weak state of private media in Ethiopia, the critical role of the Ethiopian diaspora in media ownership, and the proliferation and wild rise in popularity of entertainment-news page services Facebook and Twitter.

To better understand the problem, the project team analysed a small sample of fake news instances, misinformation, and hate speech, sorting them into sub-categories and looking for trends amongst them. Analysis of the samples' subject matter indicated that ethnonationalism and federalism were the topics most likely to feature examples of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech. Similarly, on examining the typologies of fake news samples, we found that the highest proportion was "fabricated" (without any grounding in truth). Equally, the assessment of misinformation revealed that propaganda and bias were prevalent. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there were relatively few hate speech examples from well-known media sources' print and social media pages. However, incitement to hostility against specific groups was often found in social media users' accompanying comments. Instances of all three categories are explored through case studies.

Finally, the report considers and outlines a potential risk-based approach to mitigation. With a better understanding of the problems and challenges, it becomes easier to develop more nuanced solutions. The report proposes a pro-active and risk-based approach, which identifies likely and potentially fake news, misinformation, and hate speech flashpoints and lays out the actions that will be required to mitigate them.

## INTRODUCTION

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**Violence has increased in Ethiopia.** Individuals have fought and killed one another due to political differences, ethnic rivalries, and/or religious extremism, as well as a variety of disputes over land, borders, and other resources. Hate speech, both online and offline, has thrived. At times, this brought Ethiopia into rough water. For example, in June 2019, when the Amhara regional governor Ambachew Mekonnen, Chief of Staff General Seare Mekonnen, and other government officials were killed. In October 2019, when violence across Oromia killed at least 86 people. In June 2020, when following the murder of the famous singer Hachalu Hundesa, 166 people were killed and more injured amid a wave of destruction and displacement in the Addis Ababa and Oromia region.

**The typical response to widespread instability from the Ethiopian Government is to shut down the internet – 3G and 4G networks – in the country.** These can be nation-wide shutdowns, such as following the murder of Hachalu, or partial shutdowns, such as the blackout in West Oromia that was enforced for months as government forces battled with the Oromo Liberation Front / Army (OLF/A). From November 2020 until the time of writing, the internet and communications have been shut down across large parts of Tigray. Although theoretical internet access remains low, many people have access to the internet through mobile phones, and many get their news from Facebook and other social media platforms. Therefore, shutting down the internet denies those that spread 'fake news,' hate speech, and misinformation to their audience, severely restricts people's freedom of information and ability to communicate and report, and affects economic life.<sup>1</sup>

**This report seeks to provide a rapid assessment and overview of the state of 'fake news,' hate speech, and misinformation in Ethiopia, to inform a more nuanced approach and support dialogue for a longer-term response by Ethiopian policymakers.** A review of the existing literature and open-source information on the topic will serve as a base for this study. This report will seek to (1) shed light on how prevalent fake news, hate speech, and disinformation are in the Ethiopian media and social media ecosystem, (2) improve understanding of subject matter 'flashpoints' and (3) propose some initial, nuanced, measures to reduce the risks posed by fake news, hate speech and misinformation.

## 1. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

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**This rapid assessment draws on findings from literature reviews (academic and journalistic) and primary research and analysis.** It should be noted that the primary aim of this paper is to begin a conversation on an evidence-informed approach to addressing fake news, hate speech, and misinformation. It does not claim to be, and should not be considered, the final word on this topic.

### 1.1. PRIMARY RESEARCH

**Given the resourcing available for this report, most of the primary research has been drawn from the pre-existing reporting of the @EthioCheck Twitter account,** a project funded by InterNews, whose fact-checking desk

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates of the economic cost of internet shutdowns vary but there is widespread agreement that the costs are significant. The East African reported an estimated cost of \$100 million due to the internet shutdown the government imposed in July 2020. Full article available at: <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/business/-internet-shutdown-cost-ethiopia-over-100m-netblocks-1906706>, Monday 27 July 2020.

monitors media and social media reports and develops appropriate responses. The European Institute of Peace is not affiliated with @EthioCheck or InterNews.

**The tweets from this account between June 7, 2020, and November 24, 2020,** were downloaded using an open-source tool.<sup>2</sup> The Institute's project team then categorised them into the following categories and sub-categories of Fake News, Hate Speech, and Misinformation:<sup>3</sup>

- **Fake news:** Satire, Parody, Fabrication, Exaggeration, Image manipulation, and incorrect information without agenda.
- **Misinformation:** Information used out of context, Advertising and PR, Propaganda/bias, Misreporting, and mistranslation
- **Hate speech:** Incitement to genocide, Incitement to violence, Incitement to hostility, and negative gossip (Ill-information).

It should be noted that these categories and sub-categories are not mutually exclusive. Therefore, the same item can be included in multiple categories and sub-categories.

**A total of 81 instances of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech were considered relevant for this report from the sample period.** It represents only a small representative sample of the volume of such posting across the internet in that period. Each example was then coded against each of the categories and sub-categories referred to above, recorded into a tool developed on Google Sheets, and then analysed.

## 1.2. CONSTRAINTS

### 1.1.1. A RAPIDLY EVOLVING POLITICAL SITUATION

This report intends to review fake news, misinformation, and hate speech across Ethiopia. However, shortly after work on this report began, an extensive and large-scale conflict started between the then regional Government of Tigray and the Federal Government of Ethiopia. While the report has drawn on some examples of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech related to this conflict, we also note that these problems, and the structural issues that enable them, pre-date the conflict in Tigray.

**The conflict has led to a proliferation of contradictory reports** – many of which would almost certainly qualify as fake news, misinformation, and hate speech. Due to the volume and precise nature and the difficulty of verification given the conflict's live and ongoing nature, a decision was made not to focus specifically on this conflict.

### 1.1.2. OPAQUE SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS

**While Facebook is undoubtedly the most popular social media channel in Ethiopia, accessing its data is challenging due to its business approach.**<sup>4</sup> Facebook's model is to hoard and sell its data rather than allow live

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<sup>2</sup> The tool, which converts a user's twitter posting history to a PDF document can be found at [www.allmytweets.net](http://www.allmytweets.net)

<sup>3</sup> A note explaining the criteria used for categorisation is attached as an annex. The definitions used have drawn on, and adapted the work of Edson Tandoc and Rich Ling: *'Defining "Fake News": A typology of scholarly definitions'*, Article in Digital Journalism, August 2017

access, like Twitter. This means that its vast data treasury is not easily accessible. As a result, Twitter, which allows a greater degree of access, is much more useful for research purposes. However, anecdotal and observational evidence strongly suggests that the social groups that use each platform are different. It appears that a higher proportion of Ethiopia-centric dialogue on Twitter is conducted in English, and it is often seen to target messaging to a more educated demographic and those outside Ethiopia.

Equally, there can be little doubt that fake news, misinformation, and hate speech also circulates widely on private messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram. However, due to their closed and private nature, this report could not undertake the necessary analysis to increase its nature or prevalence.

## 2. MEDIA LANDSCAPE REVIEW

### 2.1. BACKGROUND

It is widely agreed that Ethiopia's media ecosystem is weak, and the (limited) available evidence supports this conclusion. The World Press Freedom Index ranks Ethiopia 99 out of 180 countries for respect for freedom of information. Freedom House, a US-based NGO that researches democracy and political freedom, scores Ethiopia only one out of four against its "Are there free and independent media?" indicator in its Global Index.<sup>5</sup>

The initial optimism and gains in press freedom which followed the end of the EPRDF ruling coalition in 2018 were undoubtedly real and substantive. However, since then, frequent national internet blackouts and the introduction of the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation (2020) have been heavily criticised by civil society groups.<sup>6</sup>

The Government holds a powerful position on the media landscape, accounting for one third of all broadcast media.<sup>7</sup> According to a UNESCO report in December 2019, quoting data collected from the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority (EBA), there were at that point 20 privately-owned newspapers and magazines in circulation and 23 newspapers and magazines owned by the federal and regional states.<sup>8</sup> Levels of circulation for printed media remain low. A 2018 assessment by International Media Support (IMS) reported that "newspaper print runs are very low with leading private newspapers having only 15,000 copies of each issue concerning operating in a population of over 100 million".<sup>9</sup> Even accounting for the fact that each newspaper is likely to be read multiple times, readers' ratio to the population remains extremely low.

Online media plays a significant role in Ethiopia's public discourse. The online media system is mostly unregulated, with many popular Facebook pages incorporating news and entertainment operating from outside

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<sup>4</sup> 'Twitter Versus Facebook: Why Selling Access Is Better Than Selling Data', Forbes, available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kalevleetaru/2019/04/13/twitter-versus-facebook-why-selling-access-is-better-than-selling-data/> accessed 13 April 2019.

<sup>5</sup> See the Ethiopia Country page from 'Freedom in the World 2020', available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ethiopia/freedom-world/2020#CI>

<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2020/05/Hate-Speech-and-Disinformation-Prevention-and-Suppression-Proclamation.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> See section 3.2

<sup>8</sup> See *Rapid Assessment of Ethiopian Media during the Transition Period*, Mulatu Alemayehu Moges, UNESCO, December 2019 available at: <https://en.unesco.org/news/rapid-assessment-ethiopian-media-during-transition-period>

<sup>9</sup> 'Media and freedom of expression assessment Ethiopia in transition: Hope amid challenges', International Media Support, 2018, p.10. Available at: [https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Ethiopia.final\\_spread-1.pdf](https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Ethiopia.final_spread-1.pdf)

the country and managed by individuals in the diaspora. For example, Kello Media, Geda Media Network, and Kush Media Network (all focused on specific groups within Ethiopia) have, when combined, over 575,000 followers on Facebook and yet, list contact details and locations in the USA.

**Levels of distrust in the media (particularly the international media) appear to be increasing.** Globally, there is growing skepticism for "mainstream media." For example, the Edelman Trust Barometer's<sup>10</sup> country report for the United States showed a 10 point decline in public trust in traditional media. In Ethiopia, distrust of mainstream or international media is not formally tracked. However, since the commencement of hostilities in Tigray, there can be little doubt that distrust of international media has increased within the country, often as a result of the reporting and framing of the conflict. Equally, anecdotal evidence suggests that Ethiopian citizens are aware of the high likelihood of bias in state-owned media.

## 2.2. BROADCAST MEDIA

**This section summarises the Media Landscape Review findings drawing on data provided by the EBA and samples of well-known news and online pages.**

Below: Table to summarise ownership of television and radio stations in Ethiopia

Government vs. private sector broadcast media			Television	Radio
Government	36		9	27
Private	58		24	34
Total	94		33	61

**Twenty-four registered organisations collectively own 61 FM radio stations operating across Ethiopia.** Ten government-owned organisations own 27 radio stations between them, and 14 privately owned radio organisations account for 34 stations. However, 41% (14 out of the 34 FM radio stations) are owned by Fana Broadcasting SC, a company that is in turn owned by a collection of politically affiliated endowment funds.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, 8 of the FM radio stations are owned by Dimitse Weyene, a TPLF-associated company.<sup>12</sup> This means that out of the 34 FM radio stations, at least 64% (22) of the privately owned FM radio stations are owned by groups that are controlled by associated government entities.

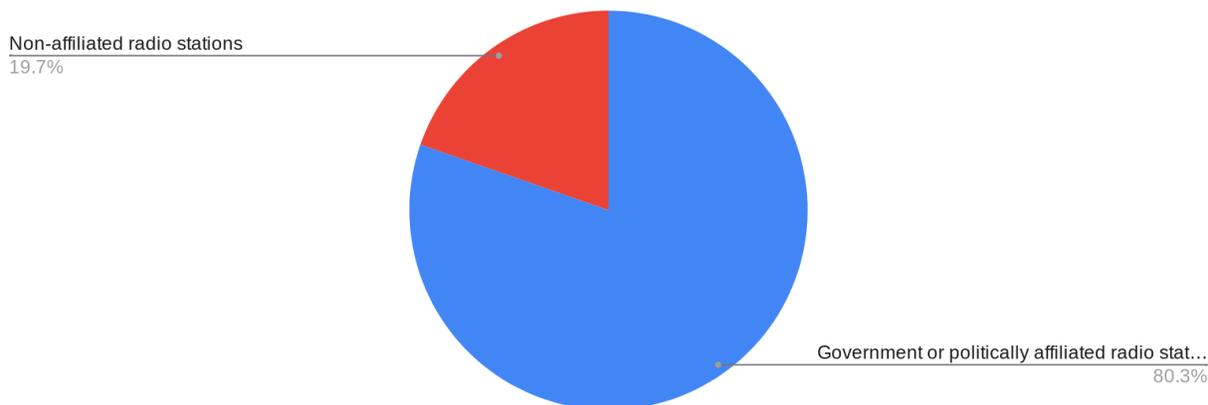
**Private radio stations depend on income from advertising to fund their business model and primarily utilise FM frequencies which cover only relatively short distances to broadcast.** This means that they are disproportionately represented in major commercial centers, such as Addis Ababa. Part of the rationale for such a considerable government presence amongst radio broadcasters is almost certainly providing a service that would not be viable for commercial providers.

<sup>10</sup> Edelman Trust Barometer Report 2021, available at: [https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2021-01/2021%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer\\_U.S.%20Country%20Report\\_Clean.pdf](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2021-01/2021%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer_U.S.%20Country%20Report_Clean.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Reportedly the ownership is predominantly made up of the EFFORT, TIRET, TUMSA and Wondo Group Endowments, representing the four political parties that made up the EPRDF before it was disbanded in November 2019.

<sup>12</sup> It is understood that these stations are no longer broadcasting on FM frequencies following the conflict in Tigray.

Below: Pie-chart shows the proportion of government or politically affiliated radio stations vs. radio stations with no known affiliation.



**The EBA and broadcasting recognise 33 television stations in Ethiopia.** Of these, 27% (9 out of 33) are Government-owned. Data is not readily available on the beneficial ownership of all the television stations currently broadcasting in Ethiopia. However, thanks to satellite broadcasting's low cost, there appears to be a more vibrant private sector presence.

### 2.3. ONLINE NEWS MEDIA

**There is a vibrant online news ecosystem that covers Ethiopia.** Although there are estimated to be only 21.14 million internet users in Ethiopia (January 2020), many individuals and organisations can boast of well over a million followers on Facebook alone. It should be noted that it was impossible to disaggregate and differentiate followers within Ethiopia and those who are abroad or part of the Ethiopian diaspora. It is likely, particularly in rural settings, that phone and internet usage will be shared. Where this is the case, it is expected and plausible that multiple people will receive their news from the filter of a single account. Equally, no research was undertaken to identify fake or bot accounts that might be used to demonstrate an increased number of followers and demonstrate higher levels of popularity, a common practice globally.

**An examination of the data in the table below reveals that the most popular social media pages are a hybrid of entertainment and news.** For example, Zehabesha (over 1.5 million social media followers), Dire Tube (over 3 million social media followers), and Ethiopian DJ (over 2 million social media followers). These are orders of magnitude higher than traditional print media's social media presence than ten times higher than The Reporter). Television stations, such as the Oromia Media Network (OMN) and ESAT, with 1.2 million and 1.5 million followers, also attract significantly higher numbers than print media. A critical difference between the 'New Media' (online-only) and traditional media (broadcast and print) appears to be the level of investment in journalists and editorial staff.

Below: Table summarising the social media following of a sample of online news sources

Online media sample analysis				Print media sample analysis			
Publication	Social media users <sup>13</sup>	Journalist staff	Editorial staff	Publication	Social media users	Journalist staff	Editorial staff
Zehabesha	1,500,000	6 - 10	1	Fortune	132,000	11 - 15	4+
Dire Tube	3,000,000	6 - 10	2	The Reporter	250,000	16 +	4+
Addis Standard	389,000	6 - 10	3	Capital	383,000	11 - 15	4+
Borkena	33,000	6 - 10	3				
Ethiopia News Agency	500,000	16 +	3				
Oromia Media Network	1,200,000	6 - 10	3				
Tigria Media House	288,000	6 - 10	4+				
Ethiopian DJ	2,000,000	0 - 5	2				
ESAT	1,500,000	11 - 15	4+				

### 3. TYPES AND PREVALENCE OF FAKE NEWS

The media landscape assessment indicates many of the most widely read sources of information have weak editorial controls, much of the media remains susceptible to state influence. Private print media has a minimal national reach.

The most popular websites in the Ethiopian information ecosystem are not necessarily produced from Ethiopia. Instead, they are often owned and managed by members of the diaspora, many of whom are perhaps more politically polarised than their colleagues in the Ethiopian media and lack the same traditional and established editorial controls and quality assurance systems.

**It is vital to improving understanding of these phenomena to address the risks posed by fake news, misinformation, and hate speech.** The following section of this report presents findings based on an assessment of 81 instances of fake news and misinformation identified by the @EthioCheck Twitter account.

#### 3.1. HOW DOES FAKE NEWS SPREAD?

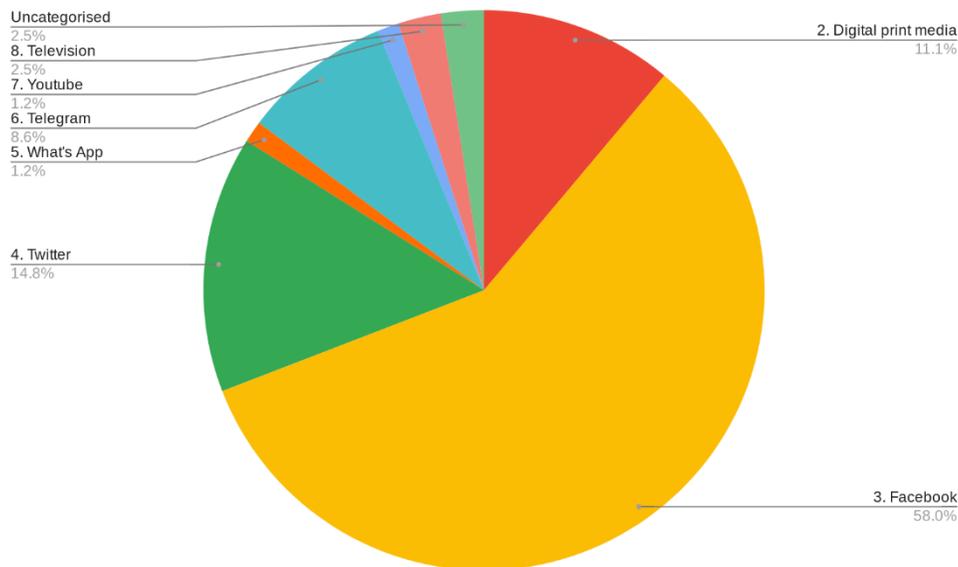
**Analysis of each fake news story's sources identified social media as responsible for 73% of the sample examples.** Of this, just under 80% appeared to originate on Facebook. No examples of fake news appeared to originate from traditional print media (or conventional print media websites) from the sample available. A sizeable

<sup>13</sup> Number of social media followers on Facebook and Twitter.

proportion, 11%, came from digital print media (i.e., Ethiopia-focused news websites or articles published exclusively online).

**A tiny proportion of samples came from television (2.5%) and Youtube (1.23%), with none from the radio (0%).** However, the low number of examples from television, Youtube, and radio is almost certainly a result of the challenges of monitoring these forms of media. The live broadcast nature of television and radio and the sheer volume of Youtube content makes monitoring both costly and hard to implement.

A pie chart to summarise the origination of fake news from the sample data set.



**The vast majority of the fake news examples were in Amharic (81%) and English (16%).** There are several reasons why this would be the case: Messaging in these languages is likely to capture the largest possible audience as both Amharic and English are widely spoken and likely to be second languages of non-native speakers. Equally, the prevalence of Amharic and English could also reflect the language skills of the fact-checkers.

**Of the 47 identified examples from Facebook, 41 were written in Amharic,** which strongly suggests that Facebook is the favored platform for disseminating fake news and misinformation in Amharic.

### 3.2. HOW DID WE CATEGORISE FAKE NEWS?

Examples of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech were broken down into a series of sub-categories. Explanations of the sub-categories used for this report are summarised in the table below:

Category	Sub-category	Description
Fake news	Satire	Use of a creative scenario to provide commentary

	Parody	A comedic commentary using imitation to make a point
	Fabrication	A claim with no basis in truth
	Exaggeration	A claim which is overstated but has some basis in fact
	Image manipulation	An image that has been doctored, altered, or misrepresented
	Incorrect information without agenda	A factual error without real intent.
Misinformation	Information used out of context	A claim used without important context affects a reader's understanding...
	Advertising and PR	Misinformation to sell or promote a product or service.
	Propaganda/bias	Deliberately advancing a specific narrative without due balance
	Misreporting and mistranslation	Erroneous misreporting and misquoting people or documents
Hate speech	Incitement to genocide	Actively encouraging individuals to pursue the destruction of a specific (usually ethnic) group
	Incitement to violence	Encouraging violence against a specific group
	Incitement to hostility	Encouraging hatred of a specific group
	Negative gossip	Low-level aspersions against a specific group

### 3.3. WHAT TYPES OF FAKE NEWS WERE IDENTIFIED?

**Across the 81 samples, 96 instances of fake news, 49 cases of misinformation, and 21 instances of hate speech** were identified (NB The categories were not mutually exclusive, and a single sample could potentially be simultaneously an example of all three categories).

**The majority (64%) of fake news items in this sample were 'fabrications,'** i.e., claims with no basis. Concerningly, given the proliferation in access to the necessary software and significantly increasing useability, 30% involved some attempt at image manipulation.

**42% of the samples were propaganda and bias,** indicating a discernible purpose and intention to influence the audience favoring a specific position.

**Relatively few (26%) of the samples contained overt hate speech.** However, it is essential to note that in many cases, while the original post may not have overtly used hate speech, it could act as a trigger for commenters and individual users. Unfortunately, individual commenters' reactions to fake news, misinformation, and hate speech were outside the scope of this project.

Below: Table to summarise types of fake news identified

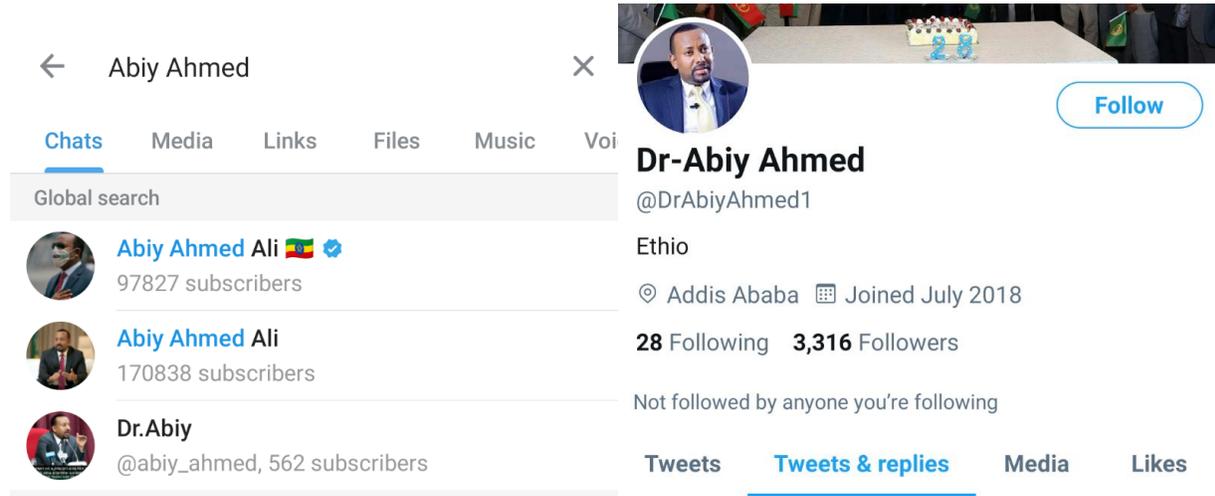
Fake News	#	Misinformation	#	Hate speech	#
Satire	0	Information used out of context	3	Incitement to genocide	0
Parody	0	Advertising and PR	3	Incitement to violence	6
Fabrication	52	Propaganda/ bias	34	Incitement to hostility	13
Exaggeration	13	Misreporting and mistranslation	9	Gossip	2
Image manipulation	24				
Incorrect information without agenda	7				
Total	96	Total	49	Total	21

### 3.4. WHAT WAS THE FAKE NEWS ABOUT?

**There was a surprisingly broad range of subject matter.** The data collection tool allowed for eight subject matter categories: 1. Religion, 2. Ethno-nationalism, 3. Federalism, 4. GERD / Water, 5. Corruption, 6. Covid-19 / Medicine and health, 7. International relations, and lastly, a category for "Other." "Other" was the largest category with 36%, followed by ethnonationalism with 31%.

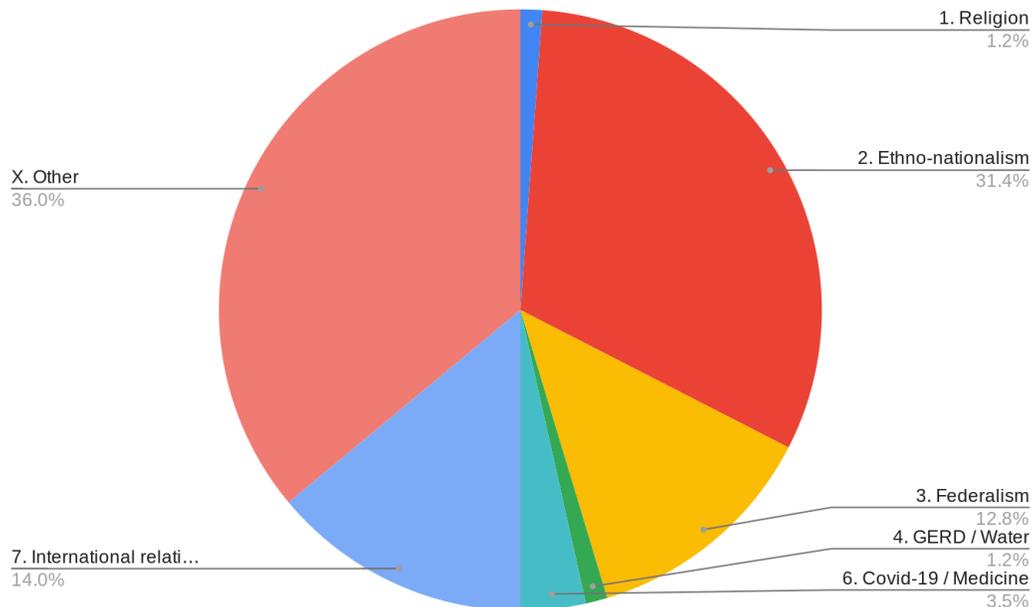
**One reason for significant categorisations as "Other" is due to the high number of inauthentic or imitation social media accounts of public figures.** For instance, on Telegram, several channels claim to belong to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed but in reality not all are official, and some are controlled by private individuals.

Below: Screenshot from Telegram listing accounts under “Abiy Ahmed” and a screenshot of fake Twitter account



In many instances, the fake accounts found on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Telegram were not actively diffusing fake news, misinformation, or hate speech. However, because they are not controlled by the people they claim to be they are open to abuse and vulnerable to misuse.

Below: Pie-chart to summarise the subject matter of the sample



### 3.5. WHAT COMMON TRENDS CAN BE IDENTIFIED IN THE FINDINGS?

Across the sample, several trends began to emerge. Given the relatively small sample size, these should be corroborated by further research:

- **Mixed news and entertainment social media pages such as Ethiopian DJ, ZeHabesha, and Dire Tube were much more likely to share fake news and misinformation than traditional media** such as Addis Fortune or the Reporter. One possible reason for this is expected to be the level of investment in editorial staff and journalistic training. Despite having ten times (1,500,000) the number of social media followers as Addis Fortune, Zehabesha has just a quarter of the staff. Equally, Dire Tube, with over three million followers, appears to have only two editorial staff.
- **Misreporting and mistranslations were relatively small in number but can be high in impact.** Reputable media organisations, such as the BBC, have robust processes to control journalistic standards and fact-check, but mistranslations and misreporting still happen. One notable example of this was a statement from Prime Minister Abiy, broadcast on Fana TV being misrepresented to large and credulous audiences. While the BBC was quick to publish a retraction (see below), inevitably, retractions are not seen by the same size of readership. Misreporting and mistranslations also provide ready ammunition to those looking to highlight examples of bias in the "mainstream media."

	
<p>Above: Apology and retraction tweet by the BBC shortly after incorrectly translating the Prime Minister's words on Fana TV.</p>	<p>Cartoon-"meme" from March 9, 2021, the front page of (state-owned) The Ethiopian Herald depicting a firing squad made up of prominent international media about to execute The Truth.</p>

- **Propaganda and bias are rife in Ethiopia's coverage**, and the diaspora has disproportionately loud voices in social media. Within our data, 42% contained bias and propaganda. Ethiopia's tense ethnic relations likely contribute to this. Many popular social media accounts are operated from abroad by diaspora groups which are arguably more ethnically segregated than their peers in Ethiopia and are targeted at specific ethnic and social groups.<sup>14</sup>
- **Hate speech was rarely the overt topic of fake news in our samples. However, hate speech was often found in the user comments that accompanied or followed posts.** This could be a result of the selection process employed. This indicates that hate speech was not being overtly disseminated by those sharing the content in our sample but was something that followers and commentators voiced as a means to apportion blame, accountability, or level accusations.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, 'Perceptions of Ethnic Federalism and the Ethiopian Diaspora Community in the US', Kassaw Tafere Merie, Walden University, 2017. Available at: <https://lawethiopia.com/images/ethnic%20politics%20in%20ethiopia/Perceptions%20of%20Ethnic%20Federalism%20and%20the%20Ethiopian%20Diaspora%20Community.pdf>

### 3.6. SPECIFIC EXAMPLES AND CASE STUDIES

The following section briefly examines three well-documented instances of fake news identified over the previous year. The case studies have been selected to provide a closer look at a range of fake news examples to improve understanding of why they originated, how they spread, and the response to them.

#### 3.6.1. ETHIOPIA LAUNCHES A SATELLITE (IMAGE MANIPULATION)

**Background:** On December 20, 2019, Ethiopia launched its first satellite, named ETRSS-1, into space. The satellite was launched from a location in China, 400km from Beijing. Before the launch's announcement, several doctored pictures of the satellite circulated on social media (see inset, below) and picked up by both Ethiopia-focused and regional news sites.<sup>15</sup>

**How did the story spread?** It appears that several doctored images circulated widely on social media. An example of this is captured in a screenshot below where a prominent commentator on Ethiopia, Zemedeneh Negatu, can be seen celebrating Ethiopia's achievement. However, while it was undoubtedly a significant achievement for Ethiopia to launch its first satellite, the imagery that went with it was digitally altered.



Above: (Left to right) The tweet shared by Zemedeneh Negatu to his 100,000+ Twitter followers; a second doctored image of the rocket; and the original image of the missile.

**What were the motivations, effects, and implications?** These doctored images' motivations appear to be relatively innocent - to illustrate and celebrate a story of national progress. Equally, the adverse effects, in this instance, were limited. Still, several social media users did mock the Government of Ethiopia and accuse it of exaggerating its achievement level. Encouragingly, several social media users used 'reverse image search' online tools to verify the image and quickly point out that the photos were doctored. However, more concerningly, the

<sup>15</sup> For example Borkena.com's coverage is archived here: <https://perma.cc/UM5U-7UA8>; and DW Amharic's coverage is archived here: <https://perma.cc/SLS5-7AM2>

report carrying the image on Borkena.com attributed the source of the image to the Ethiopia Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), implying that editorial standards could be a systemic issue in the Ethiopian media.

### 3.6.2. THE DEATH OF HACHALU HUNDESSA (MISINFORMATION)

**Background:** Hachalu Hundesa was a famous and admired Oromo singer and socio-political activist. Hachalu's songs captured the zeitgeist of the time and were taken up as anthems of the Qerroo, Oromo youth, and by Oromo farmers, particularly in the areas around Finfinne (Addis Ababa). They also celebrated the new administration led by Prime Minister Abiy. Hachalu was assassinated shortly after an interview he gave to OMN where he criticised the Oromo political forces, both in Government and the OLF/A, for the Oromo people's continued suffering. However, he had stated his desire for Oromo political forces to back and support the Abiy administration. Hachalu Hundesa was killed shortly after this interview on the night of June 29, 2020. Riots and demonstrations followed in more than a dozen cities and rural towns, and 166 people died.

**How did the story(ies) spread:** OMN media programs on the morning of June 30, 2020, were uncensored and directly transmitted the grieved youths' comments and views. Several extreme and uninformed opinions were broadcast. One set allocated blame to Neftengas, widely regarded as a 'dog-whistle racist' term for Amharas who acted as 'colonialists' in Oromo areas; calls were broadcast for the Oromo people to control their towns and establish their administrations. The TPLF-influenced Tigrina TV and DW (Demtsi Woyane) reported that the singer had been killed because he had made critical comments against the Government and opposed the Government's moves away from federalism and towards a more unitary state formation. The Government's response was disorganised, with Prime Minister Abiy describing the death as part of a set of coordinated actions by the TPLF to instigate conflicts among different ethnic groups and the then Mayor of Addis Ababa, Takele Uma, assigning blame to the OLF/A, one of the Oromo nationalist factions.

**What were the motivations, effects, and implications?** It was clear that several different camps attempted to take advantage of the well-known and well-liked singer's death. The OMN TV network gave voice to groups with longstanding grievances against Amhara settlers in Oromo lands. Simultaneously, Tigrina TV and DW tried to use the singer's death to sign the Government's hardline response to criticism or opposition to its agenda. The effect of these competing narratives was widespread violence, property damage, and the death of 166 individuals in Oromia alone.<sup>16</sup> The Government arrested over two thousand people and instituted a three-week national internet blackout across the country. The events highlighted the fragility of ethnic relations in the country.

### 3.6.3. COVID-19 AND THE APPLICATION OF FAKE NEWS LEGISLATION

**Background:** On March 13, 2020, Ethiopia reported its first known case of coronavirus. At the time, relatively little was known about the virus. Governments around the world initiated different responses ranging from herd immunity to strict national lockdowns. There was widespread, global concern that African countries suffering from weaker health systems would be particularly vulnerable to Covid-19.

On March 26, 2020, a local journalist and sharp government critic, Yayesew Shimelis, made a post on his personal Facebook page that claimed that the Government had ordered the preparation of 200,000 burial spaces in

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<sup>16</sup> Figure taken from: 'Hachalu Hundessa: Ethiopia singer's death unrest killed 166', BBC, 5th July 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53298845#:~:text=Ethnic%20unrest%20in%20the%20aftermath,died%20in%20Oromia%20region%20alone.>

anticipation of the mass deaths from the Covid-19 pandemic. Yayesew was charged under the newly enacted Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation.

**How did the story(ies) spread:** Through a Facebook post shared by Yayesew Shimelis with his several hundred thousand followers on the platform. The post was also shared widely on Twitter, Telegram, and WhatsApp. Despite the original post being taken down quickly, the points raised in the post continued to spread over Facebook and other networks.

**What were the motivations, effects, and implications?** In this instance, the background and political affiliations of the journalist were suspect. Yayesew Shimelis was a prominent government critic with a perceived alignment to the TPLF. His background and affiliation, and the broader political context, led to the accusation that not only was Yayesew spreading fake news, but that he was doing so with the deliberate intent of destabilising the country (as evidenced by the terrorism charges which were brought, but subsequently ruled out by the Judge). The claim's effect was undoubted to spread panic. Suppose the Government and Facebook had not acted quickly to challenge the presented narrative and remove the post. In that case, claims such as this could have significantly contributed to a sense of national hysteria and panic. However, this case study's is not of interest solely because of the fake news itself, but also because of the Government's response.

Yayesew Shimelis was the first person charged with an offense under the controversial Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation. A statement from the Attorney General's Office accused him of "deliberately disseminating a false information [sic] recklessly and without any attempt to verify the authenticity of the information and without considering the prevailing circumstances."<sup>17</sup>

There can be little doubt now that Yayesew Shimelis's claims to social media were incorrect and an example of shoddy journalism (no sources were cited for the information). It is not clear that efforts were taken to verify the story). However, by deciding to prosecute only a single journalist, a known critic of the Government, despite numerous other instances of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech, the Government has opened itself up to accusations of selective prosecution.

## 4. ETHIOPIA'S SUBJECT MATTER FLASHPOINTS AND RISKS POSED BY FAKE NEWS, MISINFORMATION, AND HATE SPEECH

**The majority of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech focus on a few specific topics.** Our sample's assessment tells us that fake news, misinformation, and hate speech tend to focus on ethnicity, federalism and ethnic nationalism, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), and international relations. With this in mind, this section of the report will assess the risk posed by specific, foreseeable events and the immediate steps that can be taken to mitigate these risks.

Shortly there appear to be several topics that are likely to be the subject of fake news and misinformation. For instance:

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<sup>17</sup> As reported in Addis Standard: <https://addisstandard.com/news-update-prosecutors-charge-journalist-yayesew-with-newly-enacted-hate-speech-law/>

- The 'law and order operation' / conflict in Tigray
- Unrest and inter-ethnic violence in the Metekel Zone of Benishangul Gumuz
- Relations between Ethiopia and Sudan
- The filling of the GERD
- The conduct of the national elections in 2021

Given that it is a near certainty that fake news, misinformation, and hate speech will increase concerning each of these topics, it is crucial to take the opportunity to be proactive in confronting it.

- In the short term:** Take a risk-based approach, focusing on understanding the highest risk issues and then tailoring a response to mitigate and counter them.
- In the long term:** Build a more resilient media and social media ecosystem through a stronger press, better access to information, and a population better able to analyse sources and their veracity critically.

The table below aims to be indicative, as opposed to comprehensive. The approach demonstrated could be followed with stakeholders from media, civil society, and Government.

#### 4.1. SHORT TERM EXAMPLE MATRIX - FAKE NEWS

Issue	Type of fake news	Severity (H/M/L <sup>18</sup> )	Likelihood and commentary (H/M/L) <sup>19</sup>	Potential mitigation to online fake news, misinformation, and hate speech
The conduct of the national election	Satire	L	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• L - There appears to be a low risk that satire will be mistaken for real news concerning this issue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None necessary.</li> </ul>
	Parody	M	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• M - There is significant and increasing potential for parody accounts to be misreported as public officials' statements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve the digital literacy of senior officials. While the report's sample did not include any parody examples being interpreted as news, there have been several prominent examples over the last few months. One such example can be seen from British journalist Martin Plaut's Twitter account's continued conflation and those of a parody account. Several highly implausible statements have been attributed to Martin Plaut and retweeted by senior government officials, including Ethiopia's ambassadors abroad. In one instance, an article was even retweeted, which linked directly to a parody account.<sup>20</sup> By retweeting poorly sourced material, the government / public officials undermine their narrative.</li> </ul>

<sup>18</sup> H = High risk, M = Medium risk, L = Low risk.

<sup>19</sup> H = High Likelihood, M = Medium likelihood, L = Low likelihood.

<sup>20</sup> Tweet by Fitsum Arega, Ambassador to the United States of America. Available at: <https://twitter.com/fitsumaregaa/status/1359997126885986305>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage social media to verify legitimate news media. Ethiopian journalists and news organisations, unlike their western counterparts, do not have existing and substantive relationships with social media giants such as Facebook or Twitter. This makes it harder for their accounts to be marked as “verified”, meaning imitation accounts can be confused with real accounts. Social media companies should be encouraged to invest in the verification of local, as well as international, accounts.</li> </ul>
Fabrication	<b>H</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>H</b> - Fabricated news, stories, and events will make their way into social media news. Stories are likely to be designed to be inflammatory.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve public and media access to underlying information: For example, ensure that key, factually correct, and verified data can be accessed through a government portal. At present, even the most basic government data cannot be accessed online. This makes it harder for citizens to verify bold and outrageous claims.</li> <li>Verify the social media accounts of public figures: Fake social media accounts have increased. A search of 'Abiy Ahmed' on Telegram, Twitter, or Facebook will produce numerous fake accounts. While high-profile public figures can be verified by a 'blue tick' on Twitter, a simple way for the public to know if they are following the correct account for a public official would be for it to be listed on an official website or social media page.</li> <li>Improve trust in official news sources: Make sure that official factual sources are, and are perceived to be, impartial. Government fact-sources should remain separate from affiliated party sources in the run-up to the election.</li> <li>Improve quality and balance of party-political coverage in official media: At present, there is an information asymmetry. To access information about opposition parties' platforms or activities, it is necessary to go to social media - where few if any editorial controls are applied.</li> </ul>
Exaggeration	<b>H</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>H</b> - Accounts and events will be both exaggerated and underplayed depending on biases</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Triangulation of information: At present, very little data or information is in the public domain, making it difficult for citizens or journalists to debunk exaggerated claims.</li> </ul>
Image manipulation	<b>M</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>H</b> - Inauthentic and inflammatory images are likely to be circulated on social media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Educate the public / CSOs on tools such as reverse image search available from Google Images or TinEye. A government cannot police something as massive as the internet, but the public, CSOs, and the media can ensure accountability and monitor online content. Greater awareness of tools such as reverse image searches will slow the spread of false</li> </ul>

				or manipulated images. Tools such as Fotoforensics ( <a href="http://fotoforensics.com/">http://fotoforensics.com/</a> ) can also help identify if an image has been digitally edited or altered.
	Incorrect information and factual errors	<b>M</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>H</b> - Verified information is hard to access</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve access to accurate information, for instance, through a central repository of commonly agreed facts.</li> <li>• Improve the international media's access to key government figures and the Ethiopian population at large.</li> </ul>

#### 4.2. SHORT TERM EXAMPLE MATRIX - HATE SPEECH

Issue	Type of hate speech	Severity (H/M/L) <sup>21</sup>	Likelihood and commentary (H/M/L) <sup>22</sup>	Potential mitigation to online hate speech
The conduct of the national election	Incitement to genocide	<b>H</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>L</b> - Overt incitements to genocide are unlikely to occur in the pages of either mainstream media or widely followed social media pages. However, they are likely to be found in the user comments following articles, links, and posts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with social media companies and users to take quick action on incendiary user comments posted in response to articles. The most vicious verbal and written assaults found online do not tend to come from either the formal press or the online press but rather from their users. Given the number of comments a single post can attract (sometimes thousands), it is not practical to expect a publication with a limited staff to police them. Instead, citizens can be engaged and encouraged to report hate speech to social media companies. Social media pages which consistently attract hate speech can also disable the ability to comment on posts.</li> <li>• Work with old and new media houses to ensure they understand the potential volatility of the environment in which they are reporting. Local media publications and websites will be aware of Ethiopia's potential for volatility. However, many popular websites are operated from the diaspora and are far removed from consequences and events on the ground. Efforts should recognise the critical role that externally based media can play and emphasise their responsibilities and obligations.</li> </ul>
	Incitement to violence	<b>H</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>H</b> - Overt incitement to violence is likely to occur in the run-up to the national elections.</li> </ul>	
	Incitement to hostility	<b>M</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>H</b> - Overt incitement to hostility is highly likely to occur in the run-up to the elections.</li> </ul>	
	Negative gossip	<b>L</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>H</b> - Gossip and aspersions are likely to be thrown about widely.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage responsible and evidenced statements by public officials and candidates. Those in public positions should be encouraged to evidence their statements, relying on clearly articulated facts. Efforts should be made to make sure that statements are consistent across different languages, regions, and</li> </ul>

<sup>21</sup> H = High risk, M = Medium risk, L = Low risk.

<sup>22</sup> H = High Likelihood, M = Medium likelihood, L = Low likelihood.

				audiences.
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### 4.3. POTENTIAL LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS AND TOOLS

Ultimately, combating fake news, misinformation, and hate speech is a long-term endeavor. Short-term interventions may reduce the immediate problem, but a long-term solution to complex challenges will require significant resources and effort from a broad range of stakeholders.

- **The existing legislative tools** are heavy-handed and are perceived to be used selectively. If legislative tools to combat fake news and misinformation are to be used successfully, they will need to be applied impartially and perceived to be so. While there have been reports that a new Freedom of Information law is under development, the legislation currently in place dates back to 2008, revised legislation is expected in 2021.<sup>23</sup>
- **Building and engaging with a broader definition of the press and the media.** At present, an increasing number of Ethiopians get their news and information from social media. However, despite some Facebook pages having millions of followers, they are not subject to the same regulations, oversight, or standards as the traditional press.
- **Apply the same standards to positive and negative fake news and disinformation.** Official sources can improve their credibility by correcting and clarifying incorrect information that supports their position. At present, there appears to be little effort to clarify misinformation that supports an official or pro-government position.
- **Improve access to information.**
  - Fake news and misinformation thrive in a vacuum. Suppose official and reputable news sources do not supply information on opposition activities (even outside of election times). In that case, citizens will be forced to look elsewhere to meet their demand, turning to less reputable sources for social media information. This effectively creates a channel and facilitates fake news and misinformation entering the information ecosystem.
  - International media organisations in Ethiopia are distrusted (particularly in the aftermath of the conflict in Tigray). However, the Government's response to unfavorable media reporting restricts the media's access to information and official sources. This effectively creates barriers to international media changing its position or accessing the Government's narrative and pushes them to draw on unsanctioned sources.
  - Citizens and CSOs can support the Government to debunk falsehoods if they have access to the necessary underlying information. One successful example of this is the @EthioCheck Twitter

<sup>23</sup> A 30-minute discussion of the new draft proclamation, 'Policy Matters with Getachew Dinku (PhD) on the New Media Proclamation', is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gkve85otwkg>

account. Equally, with the right tools, individual users can police fake news and misinformation - as can be seen from the numerous and highly encouraging examples of Twitter users pointing out that the weight of Ethiopia's satellite was approximately 70kgs and that the images showing several hundred-foot-tall rockets draped in flags were false.

- **Ensure use of an impartial tone and a clear separation of Government and political party.** Shortly after the conflict in Tigray began in November 2020, the Government, recognising the risks of fake news and misinformation, launched a State of Emergency (SOE) Fact Check Social Media Account. The SOE Fact Check account has been the subject of criticism from several sources for its role as a propaganda tool, claiming to monopolise truth and the lack of facts that it tends to employ in its responses.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For example, 'A glimpse into the future of government propaganda', Mail and Guardian Online, 8 December 2020. Available at: <https://mg.co.za/africa/2020-12-08-a-glimpse-into-the-future-of-government-propaganda/>



EUROPEAN  
INSTITUTE  
OF PEACE



European Institute of Peace (EIP)  
Rue des Deux Eglises 25  
1000 Brussels, Belgium

[www.eip.org](http://www.eip.org)

[info@eip.org](mailto:info@eip.org)

